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AUTHOR Scott, Robert A.
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ABSTRACT

An examination of the university dean's role and its conflicts and ambiguities considered the type, frequency, nature, and the dynamics of the liberal arts dean's interactions with his faculty and staff and the central administration. Relations with staff and the provost and the dean's role as an individual in an organization are given major attention. Information was obtained from the daily logs kept by the deans who served at Cornell University between 1965 and 1978 and from the records and observations of the author, who served as assistant and associate dean. The logs provided information about the deans' use of time, the issues that occupied them, the process of decision making, and the people who were consulted. The role of the dean as cited in the literature and background information about the three deans at Cornell are included. The concerns of the deans as revealed in the logs involved: extraordinary activities, such as student sit-ins; department budget items; operating expenses; curriculum; and faculty appointments and status. Most of each dean's time and attention concerned faculty appointments and status. It is argued that the adoption of the term "amateur" for the liberal arts dean is a means of coping with the conflicts and ambiguities of the dean's role. The skills and traits required by the position are rooted in personality and character. Posing as an "amateur" allows the liberal arts dean to exercise "moral suasion" on his colleagues. (SW)

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The "Amateur" Dean in a Complex University: An Essay on Role Ambiguity

Robert A. Scott

Cornell University

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THE "AMATEUR DEAN" IN A COMPLEX UNIVERSITY: AN ESSAY ON ROLE AMBIGUITY

1. Statement of the Issue

The liberal arts dean in a research university is often considered an "amateur" administrator. He is neither trained in management nor expected to stay an administrator beyond his term as dean. This conception of the dean as an amateur, as the chairman of department chairmen, has been described by Baldridge, et al. (1978, p.9) and by Knapp (1969), among others. Advertisements for such posts, for example Dean of the College at an Ivy League university, have been known to say, "administrative experience is not a prerequisite for the position " (Scott, 1978, p.7). In a Chronicle of Higher Education piece, Professor Charles Cherry of Villanova wrote, "Conventional wisdom has it that the qualified academic administrator is the professor who answers his mail" (1978).

However, the dean's role in a major university requires him to be the chief executive of a large operation. For example, the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell University, one of seven undergraduate units, has a budget of more than $21 million, employs 475 faculty and 530 teaching assistants in thirty-one departments, enrolls 3700 undergraduates and 1200 graduate students, and, with only one-third of the University's faculty teaches nearly one-half of all Cornell students. And this is not atypical of such colleges. Thus,

it is important to understand the full dimensions of the dean's role and his relations with his faculty, which sees him as colleague, symbol, and protector; with the university's central administration, which provides his resources and expects accountability; and with his staff, which provides him with both information and a management structure. In a complex university, the dean is the major link between the stratified collegiate structure of his college, in which his staff comprises only a small bureaucracy, and the primarily bureaucratic structure of the central administration (Ryan, 1977, p.7). These relationships and this setting provide an excellent opportunity for the study of role ambiguity.

Role, which is part of both the professional and the common language of literary criticism, philosophy, theatre, and sociology, is among the most complex and most fundamental concepts of society. Gordon (1972) conceptualizes role as

> a pattern of behavior and sentiment, organized in relation to presumed motivations, and frequently but not always connected to a specific organizational position (p.74).

We each enact several roles at once--colleague, supervisor, subordinate, friend, active citizen--and change roles during different life stages. In each stage we face different value-theme dilemmas, such as security versus challenge, increasing versus decreasing independence of action, stability versus accomplishment, and dignity versus control. It is these dilemmas, in the form of "incompatible expectations" or demands

on our roles, which pose conflicts (Carroll, 1976). Ryan (p.31) refers to those who place demands on our roles as "role senders."

What does it mean to be an "amateur" dean? Is this a pose, one face of "Eve"? In this essay, I will explore these questions and the issues which give rise to them, and offer an explanation for the use of the term.

II. Research Methods

Using the official daily logbooks of three deans who cover a period of thirteen years, and my experience (I have been an assistant and now an associate dean in the College for eleven years and have worked closely with these deans) to document and illuminate critical incidents and issues, I have examined the dean's role and its conflicts and ambiguities by studying the type, frequency, nature, and dynamics of the deans's interactions with his faculty and staff, and the central administration. Major attention has been given to the relations with his staff and the central university position of provost. This analysis should inform us in ways and in substance not now known about the dean's use of time and how he manages conflict.

This study focuses on the dean's role as an individual in an organization. Since this is an intense look at the role orientations of deans in only one setting, albeit over a decade, there is a limit to the use of my conclusions.

However, such "natural histories" (Grant and Riesman, 1978, p.18) of critical incidents can suggest hypotheses for further empirical and comparative research. The works of Becker (1958), Riesman and Jencks (1962, p.74), and Wolcott (1973, p.24) on participant observation and field or "grounded theory" have been instructive to me. In addition, Campbell's discussion of critical incident methodology and participant observation (1977, p.51) is important to understanding the research methods used.

III. The Dean's Role

Before discussing Cornell's liberal arts college deanship, however, we should take a closer look at the role of dean as discussed in the literature. Fenton (1960, p.361) says

> The majority of American minor deans, inept creatures who at an earlier more honorable incarnation could neither manage a classroom nor perform useful research, are themselves compelled to worship the mystic of the luminous teaching which they pretend to have abandoned, with enormous self-sacrifice, in order to assume the labors of administration.

However, David Riesman (1956, p.21), has said,

> ...just as big corporations have left innovations to research and development departments and confined the work of their top executive to that of chief public relations officer, so at the big universities what innovation there is seems to have been shifted out of the president's hands into those of the deans.

One wonders if this is still true. I will comment on this later.

A major study of the deanship was reported by Gould (1964). He outlines the major functions of deans by reviewing how

they spend their time (pp. 25 and 26). He quotes Corson (1960, pp. 74, 76-77) in detailing the duties of a dean in a large university:

> The processes of delegation of responsibility, on the one hand, from the faculty, and on the other hand, and more substantially, from the president, continue. These processes of delegation are observable in small institutions and in large; but the rate at which delegation proceeds increases substantially as the size of the institution, and especially the size of its faculty, grows....
>
> As the institution grows larger, the dean customarily is relieved of many or most of his responsibilities for student affairs....

According to Gould (p.34n) the most important responsibility of the dean is to be a judge of people. This includes judgment of both current and prospective faculty, and the "reasonableness of their requests, the urgency of their needs, [and] the degree of candor they bring to the consideration of a problem."

Relations with the president and senior staff of an institution vary greatly. In large research institutions,

> the relationship of the president to the dean seems to parallel in many ways the relationship of the dean to the chairman. In general, the presence of chancellors, vice presidents, provosts, and deans of faculties simply complicates the picture without effectively changing it. When we examine their roles, we see that they either assist the president in personnel matters or replace him entirely and free him to be an ambassador from the university to the outside world" (ibid., p.53).

Rasmussen (1978, p.26) cites the following functions of the dean.

> In terms of activities, deans spend much of their time and energy working with the faculty. In most institutions, in fact, they serve as both the servant and the supervisor of the faculty, which of necessity results in a high degree of ambivalence for both deans and faculty. Deans work for the faculty, doing thankless administrative tasks that allow classroom teaching to be effective; they speak for the faculty both within and outside the institution; and they are generally seen by the faculty as supporters or encouragers. But they must also do the following things that may be seen by the faculty as annoying or threatening:
>
> . . Act as an evaluator, for example, by helping faculty evaluate their teaching, recommending salary increases and promotions, and allocating scarce funds among competing programs.
>
> . . Act as a gadfly, by prodding faculty to research, write, and publish, stimulating change, and trying to reduce parochialism.
>
> . . Act as a mediator, both between opposing forces within the institution and between external and internal groups.
>
> . . Act as a conservator, maintaining the primary thrust of the institution and resisting fads or hasty innovations.

But these descriptions do not seem to improve the basic reputation of deans expressed by John Ciardi, "Education is too important a business to be left to deans" (Dibden, 1968, p.185), and the anonymous definition of a dean as a person too dumb to be a professor and too smart to be president (Eble, 1978, p.7). Then, there's the other jibe reported by Eble; "The faculty's job is to think for the University, the president's to speak for it, and the dean's to make sure that the faculty doesn't speak or the

president think" (ibid.). The disdain is clear: we can take second-rate academic men and make deans or administrators out of them (ibid., pp. 91 and 92). After all, they are to be "caretakers" and no more (ibid., p.92).

Related to these judgements is another; that those who show too much interest in academic administration will be excluded from it (ibid.). Those who climb the ranks of academic administration are those who get there by not aiming for it (ibid.; Cleveland, 1977, p.33).

These accounts of the dean's role and status give loud hints about why deans are considered amateurs. In this context, "amateur" means unschooled and lacking in specialized knowledge. This is the view expressed by Baldridge, et al. (p.45). Gaff, et al., (1978) sum up the situation this way: "Most [deans] have not been trained in the skills demanded of them as educational executives; they have neither planned for careers in administration nor studied others functioning successfully in similar roles." And this situation is not only condoned but encouraged by faculty and academic leaders (Eble, p.9).

Deans seldom receive direct evaluation of their performance (Rasmussen, p.23). The result is a tension between the management-type demands on the role and its collegial, amateur obligations. This is the crux of the problem cited by Culbertson (1976, p.14) and elaborated by Zemsky, et al, (1978), who report the problems of decentralized management in the university. They state (p.251):

> The third limit to responsibility center management is the skills of the deans. In accepting the importance of decentralized planning, we assumed that responsibility center management would result in stronger deans. What we never quite asked ourselves was, "Just how much damage could a weak dean do?" The answer, it turns out, is substantial damage. Weak deans seldom understand how the system works. They fail to contest the allocation of subvention funds or the attribution of indirect costs. And because they themselves do not understand, they similarly fail to teach their faculty members the incentives on which the system depends.

IV. Findings and Analysis

With this background, let us now examine the setting and activities of the liberal arts deanship at Cornell. How is the dean's role shaped? How should one characterize the dean's relations with his staff, the central administration, and others?

The major sources of information for this discussion are the daily logs kept by the deans who served in office between 1965 and 1978 (The current dean, alas, does not use them), and my records and observations during my terms as assistant and associate dean.

The official daily logbooks of the Arts College Dean are like a diary or ship's log--a record of meetings and conversations kept in leather-bound books with printed page numbers. This College tradition makes it possible to find dates and topics before searching other more specialized sources of data such as correspondence and memoranda for the record. The logs are excellent sources of information about the deans' use of time, the issues that occupied them, the process of decision-making, and the people who were consulted.

The three deans of this period were quite different in style and concerns, but similar in fundamental ways. Each was a senior member of the faculty who had been at Cornell for fifteen years or more; each had been chairman of a relatively large, strong department. (These criteria distinguish every dean the College has had in modern times.) Each dean was appointed to a five-year term with no expectation of reappointment. The first dean in this study, a philosopher, sought what I call "program purity." He helped build a major biological sciences group; he helped start the six-year Ph.D. program for undergraduates; and he helped recruit distinguished faculty to the College and build strength in the humanities. He also forced the dissolution of the Speech part of the Department of Speech and Drama, and transferred the Geology Department to the Engineering College. The second dean, an economist, was seen as a defender of the College during a time of budget cuts. He also initiated new forms of study called "Concentrations," which are like "minors," in Law and Society, Religious Studies, and Biology and Society. It is interesting to note that some of the major program problems and issues he faced had to do with his own weakened department. However, it was generally acknowledged to be in better shape after his term, not because he favored it, but because he brought in outside evaluators who recommended specific changes in it. The third dean was a psychologist who became an

advocate for strengthening the humanities, general education, and the writing program. He took strong stands on issues. He said several times that when he saw a "white horse" he had to ride it. This same dean characterized the position as the last chance for a renaissance education.

Each of these men was highly verbal, concerned about the use of language, and wrote many memoranda. They used their logs diligently.

A review of the logs reveals that the concerns of these deans were, not unexpectedly, the concerns of the collectivity that is called the College. There are too many differences in a large college of arts and sciences for it to be a true collegium; but it is a collectivity (see Ryan, p.21, for comments on this function of size). The concerns recorded can be organized into groups: (a) extraordinary, such as student sit-ins; (b) department budget items such as salaries and operating expenses; (c) curriculum, including new courses and fields such as Black Studies, general education, writing, free enterprise, and those mentioned above; and (d) faculty appointments and status. This last item took most of each dean's time in his discussions in person and by phone with department chairmen and senior faculty, and was the most frequent subject of his discussions with the central administration. The other areas were either discussed infrequently or were delegated to the dean's staff or to faculty committees after the dean formulated directions for them.

Among faculty appointments and status issues, I include replacements for retirements, resignations, tenure failures, and leaves of absence; promotions; meeting outside offers; distributing named chairs; and perquisites such as paid leaves, extra space, extra secretarial help, housing, research assistants, and research accounts. These are items of negotiation for which no fixed rules are established. Faculty could and did use their prestige or an offer from another university to bargain for extra perquisites. Obviously, the strong departments could lend powerful support to help their members in their claims (Ryan, p.24). A department might even make the claim for its colleague.

The questions and decisions forced upon the dean by these issues are several. How is he to treat departments equitably when they vary so much in claims and in strength? Whom should he believe? To whom should he grant additional status? The complexity of these issues and the diversified nature of the organization tend to make the dean withdraw to his own suite and make many of these decisions by himself rather than assign them to college committees. However, establishing committees, consulting senior faculty, building support among friends, and seeking compromise are also valid coping mechanisms, as are avoidance, erratic responses, and direct decision-making (Ryan, p.32).

The pressures and conflicts built into the possible solutions to these problems are not unnoticed in the literature.

Solmon and Tierney (1977, p.413) discuss the phenomenon of intrarole conflict that arises out of the mediation process when one acts as a liaison between, e.g., one's college and the university. In the circumstances described above, the dean is under pressure by the central administration to stay within his budget while his colleagues place him under pressure to keep the faculty "stars" happy, to replace senior positions with senior appointments, and to add faculty in new areas of study.

Judging from the deans' logs and my own experience, the discussions between deans and provosts are almost always about money--new appointments and perquisites--and only rarely about policies or goals. Therefore, the entries in logs about discussions with the provost varied greatly over the past decade. Whenever money in the College became limited, decisions about resources were pushed upward from the dean to the provost, and discussions were frequent.

I was at first surprised at how rarely deans commented in their logs about the administrative staff of the College. But then I quickly remembered that these deans spent very little time with staff not responsible for financial and academic matters. The budget manager's name appears often, and the senior administrator is noted, but the fact that there were nearly three dozen other members of the dean's staff is not reflected. Nevertheless, the staff has grown in size--in fact, it has more than doubled--as new demands for specialized information and functions have become known. The deans concentrated on certain areas of

responsibility and relied on administrative staff and faculty committees for the others.

With faculty, student, and alumni groups, these deans stressed their faculty membership and their amateur status as administrators. It was almost as if they hoped to engage in a self-fulfilling prophecy--I am an amateur; therefore, I will be judged an amateur.

But, can this be the case? Can we regard as an amateur administrator someone who initiates major program changes and leads a complex organization with a budget that has exceeded $10 million for the past decade? The skills and traits required by the position have been noted. Eble (pp. 94-97) includes patience, an ability to reserve judgement, but a willingness to make judgements when necessary; confidence and competence; courage and integrity; a reputation for fairness and respect for the opinions and actions of others; sensitivity; compassion; security; and the ability to put up with petty annoyances. Gould (p.99) cites leadership, which he defines as the ability to act

> as a balance spring bringing all the contrary forces within the system into harmonious action so that the democratically perceived objectives may be accomplished with distinction if not dispatch.

Griffiths argues that the key administrative process in an organization is the ability to bargain (1977, pp.1-18). Ryan p.17) calls it the talent for mediation.

The aforementioned are not trained skills, but traits that are rooted in personality and character. Eble (p.9) suggests that it is because these kind of abilities are the requirements for successful academic administration that deans resist formal training. They apparently believe that personality and character are matters for self-help, not courses. Kanter (n.d., p.5) argues that in contrast to middle-level administrators who require technical competence for their jobs, deans (and presidents) need qualities of "moral suasion." It is the skills as a political actor that count. She says,

> In any boundary roles in a college or university--roles that must mediate between environments, constituencies, and factions--the skills that seem important are the ability to: bring people together; give bad news without provoking too much resentment; salesmanship; negotiation; understanding the faculty and how to deal with them; and tactics as a "supreme mediator."

An essential ingredient is trust. For these reasons, it makes sense that the deans selected had previously been department chairmen in the College. The faculty, therefore, had some chance to see that the person offered to them as dean had the requisite skills, and could be trusted.

Academic deans, especially in liberal arts colleges, have been called "amateurs" because they have not been schooled for the position and have not had previous experience in the deans' office (Gould, p.94). And they are thought to be, somehow, the less for it.

Last winter, after the third dean resigned in protest over funding for the College, the financial officers of Cornell urged the College to appoint a "real dean," i.e., one with management experience. Our deans have been viewed as unrealistic and "poor" administrators, especially in contrast to professional school deans. However, the latter are no better schooled for their principal duties than the former--they, too, rely on traits, not training--and they have the advantage of smaller numbers of faculty who share a basic body of expert knowledge. As deans, they only appear to be better managers.

I believe the charges against the liberal arts dean can be shown to be unfounded. The term "amateur" has no meaning for the evaluation of a dean's administrative skills, which people normally assume as its reference. Well then, why do these deans adopt the appellation and call themselves "amateurs"? Is it a pose, a new face for "Eve"? I think it is. I also think that commentators and deans have been using different conceptions of the term "amateur." Critics use it to mean unskillful; deans use it to mean one who engages in an activity for its own value and not as a means of livelihood.

The complex university combines bureaucratic, political, and collegial elements (Baldridge, et al, chapter 2). The successful dean in this context, i.e., the one who maintains order and morale in the collectivity, and achieves his and the college's objectives, is the one who can exercise "moral suasion" on his colleagues. To gain their trust quickly,

he must be one of them, at least in status if not in local membership. (Obviously, different styles would be useful in different settings.) His self-esteem and sense of achievement are based in part on their perceptions of him (Scott, p.91). If he were not to pose as an "amateur" dean, but were to assert himself as a "professional" dean--i.e., one who has left teaching to become a full-time administrator--he would mark his departure from the collectivity and lessen his powers of moral suasion. It is interesting to note in this regard that in most studies of the deanship, respondents say they plan to return to teaching; whether they mean to or not, however, is another question (Konrad, 1978, p.20; Zimpher, 1978). Therefore, one can argue, as I do, that the adoption of the term "amateur" is a means of coping with the conflicts and ambiguities forced on the dean's role by the multiple "role senders" he faces. And since it is the faculty which hold his moral capital, he adopts the pose they require. He accepts the name "amateur" and makes the most of it.

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